

Poor Children, Poor Teachers

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Several years ago, a young substitute teacher in the Trenton, New Jersey school system was assigned one morning to a kindergarten class. She was to substitute for one of the two co-teachers who ordinarily taught this class which came in two shifts, fifty children in the morning and fifty in the afternoon. She reported to this writer the following impressions of the teacher she was assisting and the way she handled the class. The teacher wore dark glasses to teach in (not because she had eye trouble; she removed them when she was alone with the substitute) and this seemed to symbolize all too well her contempt for and distance from the children. The teacher had clearly decided which of the children were "bad" and which (the very few who were especially clean, docile, and slightly more Caucasian in appearance) were "good." If one of the ones she saw as good did something bad, she

ignored, minimized or enjoyed the behavior. If one of her bad ones did something bad she was vicious; if they were good, she did not see it, enjoy it or reward it. Almost all of the children in the class were Negroes, but there were some Puerto Rican children also. At one point, when a few, terrified Spanish-speaking children whispered together, she said, "What's this, the Latin Quarter?" One child was found guilty of a minor infraction, and she gave him a tongue lashing, reminding him in the course of it that his mother did not come to PTA meetings and so clearly did not care about him, and admonished the other children not to like or to be like this terrible child. Then she sent him to stand in the corner, and forgot about him. Forty five minutes later the substitute, unable to bear it any longer, reminded her, and she released him, acting as though she had been just about to. Although there were school materials available in the cupboards around the room, these were not used. All day long, in that barren room, she barked orders at the children, had them play nursery games, such as "I'm a Little Teapot," but mostly harangued them on how worthless, disgusting, undeserving, bad and stupid they were. She was very friendly and considerate to the substitute teacher, and was much relieved (she said so) to see that she was white, like herself.

In another school, in Poughkeepsie, New York, a Negro boy spoke out of turn in his fifth grade class. His family had recently arrived in Poughkeepsie from Florida. That day his

mother got a call at work from the principal of her ten-year-old's school. Her son had spoken out of turn in class, and would not be allowed to return to his classroom until his mother came down to the school to speak with the principal. As a poor woman living in public housing, just up from the South, she was terribly vulnerable. She satisfied the school by her abasement and humility and fear, and went down to the school to apologize to the principal. In her vulnerability and inexperience, she could not question the school's handling of the incident, or realize that in any case, for a minor infraction it was out of all proportion to call the mother out of work. The principal had no way of knowing whether the people the boy's mother worked for would dock her pay for this time out from work, or even dismiss her because of this incident.

That summer, almost across the continent, at the bottom of the Grand Canyon, a young student from the East, working as a summer recreation and school program leader for the Havasupai Indian tribe, was discovering what sort of schooling was provided for those Indian children during the year. There was no school in the canyon for that small tribe, and all their school-age children were sent away each year to boarding school. The student reported to this writer that for some reason-- bureaucratic convenience, perhaps, since there were not very many of them-- the Havasupai children were assigned to what was essentially a reform school: one that was used for delinquent Apache

children, whom the teachers at the regular Apache school were unable to control. The Havasupai children, whose tribe has a culture which discourages self-assertion, were living and going to school with aggressive, hostile children who did not speak their language, and were taught by teachers who also did not speak their language or understand their traditions, and did not communicate much of the ways of the majority culture to them, either.

Here we have three incidents in which children and their families were demeaned and degraded in the public education system. Even if they were isolated, unusual cases they would be a cause for great concern. But there is much evidence that they are merely examples-- and not at all the worst ones, at that-- of a complicated and terrible situation which exists now in this country.

The publication of books by three rather young, naive white teachers, Jonathan Kozol, Herbert Kohl and James Herndon, in which they reported the conditions they found in the ghetto schools where they found their first teaching assignments, has helped make this a matter of widespread concern. What Kozol, Kohl and Herndon found, and what we have seen from the three horror stories this writer has told is a system in which children are being destroyed by the very institutions which for many of them would provide the only chance they might have to escape from or to change the appalling conditions of their lives. Kozol's book is called Death at an Early Age.

Nat Hentoff's book about one good principal's work in Harlem is called Our Children Are Dying. This talk of death is not sensationalism. When people's spirit and sense of personal worth are destroyed it is a kind of murder, perhaps worse than literal homicide because the victims live to witness their own nullification.

The inhumane assault on children's dignity and self-esteem is partly the result of many educators' feeling of racial or social superiority to the children and their families. One cannot love or care the way a teacher should if one feels one is dealing with alien, inferior and frightening creatures. Kozol, Kohl and Herndon heard their associates call the children names like "animals" and "black stuff." If the feeling of a shared humanity is missing, then one descends to inhumane treatment like the humiliating or even the whipping of children that Kozol witnessed. If the teacher feels that his pupils are somehow subhuman, then he is also likely to have low expectations for their achievement. As Rosenthal has shown, this expectation is likely to be self-fulfilling. That is, if the teacher expects a child to do well, he will-- for whatever reasons-- then do well. If a teacher expects a child to fail, then he will fail. And, of course, once the expectation of low achievement is borne out, then the teacher's low expectations have been confirmed, thus making this a vicious circle.

Often, a child adopts the school's picture of him as a person incapable of learning. But Herbert Kohl told of one girl who had a different reaction, and it is possible that

there are other children who handle the situation in the way this girl did. The girl, who was in the "bottom" sixth grade class Kohl taught his second year in a Harlem school, came up to Kohl one day and demonstrated that she could actually read extremely well. She then demonstrated to him how she could read on the low third grade level (with omissions, reversals, etc.) that had put her in the bottom section of her class. "I wouldn't read for those teachers," she said. (Kohl, p.185)

It seems that the one bit of control and self-determination left to that pupil of Kohl's was to control what impression the school got of her abilities. How difficult it must have been to choose which was a worse price to pay (these were really the only two choices open to her, except for the year in Kohl's class): to do badly, and be relegated forever to the bottom rung of the ladder but be in control of their impressions, or to do well and thus submit to the school's values, controls, restraints and humiliations, thereby violating her own integrity.

The problem of racism is compounded in the case of many Negro teachers who, because of their own struggles in avoiding the lot accorded most of their race, may maintain more vigorously than white teachers the distance between themselves and black children and deny more vehemently the harsh realities of slum life. Herbert Kohl's sixth grade class put out a class newspaper which was planned and executed entirely by the children. It included reports on the Ancient Mythologies the class had studied, stories, illustrations, essays on integra-

tion, comic strips, and poetry. This is the poem, "The Junkies," which appeared in the paper:

When they are
in the street
they pass it
along to each
other but when
they see the
police they would
run some would
just stand still
and be beat
so pity ful
that they want
to cry

(Kohl, p.147)

Kohl reports that the school administration responded by sending a Negro teacher to convey to the class the principal's reactions.

She entered the room smiling, a copy of AND [their paper] and another class newspaper in her hand. The children quickly took their seats and snapped to attention...they cared what she thought of their work.

I just read your magazine. It was really interesting, children. Robert Jackson, you really draw beautifully, only Robert, why do you draw so much violence-- child, your imagination needs to rest. Children, I don't understand why you talk of so much fighting and stabbing. You can't possibly know about that. Tell me now, who knows what a junkie is? See, I told you no one knows. Newspapers and magazines aren't for that type of nonsense. Now look at this sheet, imagine it was put out by the fifth grade. Listen to this, you know how to do better.

Shop With Mom

I love to shop with mom
And talk to the friendly grocer,
And help her make the list
Seems to make us closer. (Kohl, p.151)

The inhumane assault on children's dignity and self-esteem is not only the result of the way educators may feel about children from certain sectors of the population; it is also rooted in a basic misconception of education, an improper understanding of what learning is and of how to teach. Public school teachers are given graded textbooks and readers, based on a pre-planned, pre-packaged curriculum, and they are considered to be successful if they get a good number of their pupils "through" these books. (The shameful role played by textbook publishers as they get whole school systems committed to their graded series is one that should be exposed widely. They are the ones who profit from the schools' ignorance or weakness and the children's difficulties.) The children's success in school is measured by their progress through these books, which have no connection with anyone's own life experience, let alone that of poor children.

To take a very striking example of how children can learn to read and write when the curriculum is based on their own inquiry, we can consider Sylvia Ashton-Warner's great success in teaching the Maori children in New Zealand. In her book, Teacher, Miss Ashton-Warner describes how the children, for whom English is not even the mother tongue, learned to read and write in English (on a level far beyond that expected by producers of "readers" or "reading books") simply by asking her to write for them the words they cared about and wanted to use in their own stories. She was not threatened if the

words were often not "nice," and showed their awareness of intimate and powerful situations and emotions. She was not amused or scornful if the words seemed long or "hard." The children were free to learn in a way that proceeded from where their curiosity and concern were really engaged.

Of course, once a teacher has learned where the interests of a particular group of children lie, and what common experiences the children have, he can then have a good idea of what materials to use, what areas of inquiry to pursue, that might expand the children's interests and help them begin to be ready to join the community of the educated. When Jonathan Kozol read Langston Hughes' poem, "Ballad of the Landlord," some of his fourth graders really saw the point of reading and writing for the first time, and for the first time really wanted to be educated and believed it might even be possible for them. They taught themselves to spell all the words in the poem, and many children learned it by heart, although Kozol had never given them the assignment of memorization or such a list of "spelling words." It was for reading this poem with his pupils that Kozol was fired. Admitting at school that there are slumlords and that these children could understand that concept from their own experience was too threatening to the Boston school system.

The denial by the schools of the children's real life situations and ^{the} refusal ^{by the schools} to become engaged in confronting the problems facing their families causes the children to feel a profound sense of alienation from the schools. In a sense,

this feeling of distance from the school can be helpful to children in protecting their feeling of personal worth in the face of teachers' humiliating and undervaluing them. One New York City teacher has reported to this writer that many of the humiliations he has seen these children suffer have seemed to harm them less than similar treatment would have harmed a middleclass child, who would be more likely to identify with the teacher and accept the teacher's evaluation of him. But this small merciful protection comes nowhere near excusing the schools for their failures.

The alienation and the boredom and sense of hopelessness the children have because the curriculum is lifeless, irrelevant and incomprehensible causes them to behave in disruptive, rebellious ways (except for the few who become lifelessly docile.) And because the schools have not established themselves in the children's minds as institutions which care about what the children know and care about and what they want to know, there is no way to encourage proper behavior in a positive way, since there is nothing the children want or need that the schools are willing to offer. The discipline problem causes the school personnel to fear the children, since there is no common goal established, and the educators therefore develop a strong emphasis on authority, on teacher-imposed order and control. James Herndon and the other new teachers at his school in California were briefed at a meeting before the school year began. The vice-principal explained to them that a school

was like the Army. She explained to the teachers, whose entire orientation meeting was concerned with the problem of discipline, "In order that learning may take place,...there must first be order." (Herndon, p.17)

Later in the year, when it was becoming clear to the administration that Herndon did not know how to get control over his classes, he was given advice on how to do so. (It did not occur to them that Herndon had rejected their concept of order, and was seeking to enable the children to control themselves, if and when such control was necessary for their own purposes. The principal simply assumed that Herndon was not forceful enough to achieve the kind of control that must be every teacher's goal.) The principal's advice to Herndon was that he should take voice lessons, so that he could learn "projection, like an actor, or a good officer. The tone of command." (Herndon, p.112) One teacher told him that these children did not know anything, so they should not be allowed to speak in class but should instead copy paragraphs from the board. A consultant of the school district told him that "Teaching these children is like training animals. For each task you want them to do, you must offer them a carrot."

That is, if you hold a carrot in front of them, they never realize they're pulling the cart (learning.) (Herndon, pp. 106, 111)

To kill the children's interest, curiosity and thinking powers, to teach without caring what each child wants to and can learn, just going through all the graded texts in one subject after another, is wrong whether one is teaching chil-

dren of poverty or not. It is a worse thing to do to poor children, however. Herndon says toward the end of his book, The Way It Spoized to Be,

If the kids went along with us in [another school], it was for two reasons: first, there were fewer of them and we were able to allow them enough leeway to live; and second, they were white, middle-class kids in America. Not that the system in general was right for them-- only that they fit the ideal of America in 1960 without much worry about it, had a richer life-diet outside of school, and so were tough enough to take it.

All right. Some can take it, and some can't. Those who cannot expose the point-- it's not any good for anyone.

As Herndon says, disadvantaged children show in bold relief how education isn't working-- isn't working for all children. Now, if all children are being educated badly-- that is, not allowed, encouraged or helped to be original, creative, and true to their own ideas and selves-- what does this say about the ones who grow up to be teachers? How can we really expect them to be courageous and flexible, and unthreatened by change and originality if they are the very ones who have made it most successfully through the system as it now stands? Will these not be the people most narrowly and defensively committed to education as it ~~is~~~or was-- and least tolerant of both failure and criticism? This would be especially true of those who use this profession as their entree to respectability and the world of the middle class, but it would hold true for teachers from all social strata, if they are products of standard American education.

A design for reform which depended on simply replacing the cruel, insensitive teachers with kind, concerned ones (if that were even possible) would not succeed in establishing a dependable system. Something has to be done which will make it possible for all children to go to school in dignity even though they may be taught by the most ordinary people. There has to be a way of insuring the proper kind of treatment for the children. Elliott Shapiro, the Harlem principal Nat Hentoff so glowingly described in Our Children Are Dying, gained the trust of the teachers and the neighborhood community. The experience of his school shows us that even teachers who have not been specially chosen can teach satisfactorily if they are not afraid, know their principal will keep their classes as small as possible, and do not feel demeaned. In other words, even the children who had the barely adequate teachers in that school, and may not have gotten a good education, were at least protected from being harmed or diminished.

Of course, New York City is very lucky to have Elliott Shapiro, both as a principal, and in his later role as a district superintendent, but our aim should be to try to institutionalize some of the reforms in practices and attitudes that he achieved through personal conviction and persuasion. One approach that has been successful in New Haven, parts of New York and elsewhere has been the Community School concept. This is an official attempt to make the school a real part of its community, mostly through such devices as

keeping the school open through the evening so that it is accessible to people from the neighborhood. People of all ages should feel welcome at their community school. At the Conte School in New Haven, old people play chess and bocce in the schoolyard, and mothers feel free to bring their young children there. This writer would take the community school idea further, in ways which would make it more truly an instrument of social and educational reform. For instance, instead of simply leaving the school building open until eleven o'clock each night, so that big boys and men could play basketball and adult education classes could be conducted, the school should be manned each late afternoon and evening at least in part by members of the regular staff of the school-- teachers and administrators-- so that the children could get help in the afternoon with homework, school and neighborhood projects and recreational activities, and parents could come in the late afternoon or evening to have conferences with their children's teachers and to work on neighborhood projects. Staff members might have certain weeks when they were on a three to nine shift instead of a nine to three shift. This would be a good way for the teachers to have institutional support and guidance in doing the kinds of things that would involve them more with the community in a way that the parents and children could appreciate. The neighborhood school board concept being attempted in New York's decentralization program is another way to try to make a school a part of the neighborhood commun-

ity. It may founder completely because of the lack of communication and understanding among the teachers' union, local boards, and the central board and its entrenched bureaucracy.

But no matter what changes in structure we may make (such as the community school approach) that allow teachers to approach their pupils and the families in ways that take them beyond the limits of the classroom, they will be sterile reforms (achieving-- even if we are successful-- more an absence of bad than the growth of good) unless we are also working on ways to help insure that teachers can achieve respect for human life. Is not the teaching profession under a special obligation to require that its members have truly democratic and egalitarian attitudes, since they hold positions of such awesome influence and power over defenseless children? It is important to realize, however, that while the teachers do have great power over the children, they have no real power, status or recognition in the society at large. It is probably this that accounts for so many teachers' being petty tyrants in the classroom. One cannot have respect for others if one does not have respect from others and self-respect. While teachers are striking for better pay or job security, what they really need is status and influence. The position of classroom teacher should be as honored and respected (and as well paid, too, since that is our prime way of showing honor and respect in this society) as the positions of professor, executive, research and consulting specialist or high government official.

There are ways to accomplish this. Schools should be part of the academic community as well as the neighborhood community. This should not mean just calling in "experts" from the academic community to evaluate teachers and report to the school boards how the teachers are accomplishing particular educational programs; this is what was done to decide about continuing or dropping the More Effective Schools experiment in New York City, and the teachers only felt that anyone could judge them but their own evaluations were discounted or ignored. Rather it should mean that the teachers themselves become a part of the academic hierarchy, free to exchange ideas and be regarded as specialists in their field. Nowadays, the only way for a teacher to achieve promotion is by leaving the classroom (to go into administration or publishing, for instance, or become "program brokers" for narrowly conceived curriculum reforms.) A successful teacher should instead be recognized as a Master Teacher, and this should be a title that carries great weight and prestige. A Master Teacher should be a person to whom new teachers, administrators, social reformers and scholars can come for help, guidance, insight and information.

State requirements for teacher certification should not be so rigid, and should not be based on the acquisition of techniques for getting control and keeping order, or standardized, pre-digested, textbook-bound content to present to children, or watered-down philosophical issues of education.

Instead, teacher training should be primarily concerned with opening the student teachers' eyes, minds and hearts to the world around them, to encouraging the development of a humane approach to other people and a commitment to the social betterment of others and the moral betterment of themselves. Preparation for teaching should not be a matter of racking up academic credits, but should be regarded as a time for attitude change, the one opportunity we have to break the vicious cycle of providing poor teachers for poor children.

Courses in sociology and economics should give them insight into the structure of the lives of those they will be teaching. Field work in community action groups and chances to meet and learn from parents would foster compassionate understanding. Courses in black culture, history and literature would be good not just to give Negro people pride, but to foster understanding and respect in white teachers. The study of the Spanish language and culture should be part of the background of a city school teacher also. Teachers who work in schools for Indians (or, if we achieve universal desegregation, in schools which Indian children attend) should be informed about the history, language and traditions of the Indian tribes.

Teachers should have the opportunity to take sabbatical leaves, not because the only reward for doing one's job as a teacher is escape from the classroom, but because the rest of society will need to learn from the teachers what really goes on in the classroom, and teachers themselves will need some time and distance from the classroom to formulate for

themselves what it is that they have learned-- about children and about themselves. Appropriate activities for these periods away from the schoolroom would be writing, teaching student teachers, working in social action projects, or studying or working at anything of interest and thus expanding the intellectual horizons of all.

Several important changes should emerge as byproducts of this approach. One, the teachers, because they were being encouraged for independent thinking and learning themselves, would have a better attitude to what the children should be accomplishing in school. If teachers were no longer automatons whose only sort of professional advancement lay in memorizing methods of teaching New Math, or making a group of children "finish" a grade unit, but were regarded instead as autonomous persons whose independent thought processes and ideas had real value for the rest of the world, they should then tend to honor the development of autonomous learning approaches in their pupils. We would then have curricula that were truly responsive to the children's needs and strengths. Also, this kind of upgrading of the teaching profession would tend to weed out automatically many future bad teachers, by discouraging those who have been choosing a teaching career simply because it is undemanding, has good hours, and ^{is} respectable. (There are always people who will choose respectability over respect.)

It should be recognized that future teachers have individual learning styles just as children do, and come to

teacher training from varied backgrounds. This being so, there is no reason to insist that they all must prepare and study to be teachers in the same way. If we accept the idea that being a good teacher is less a question of having "covered" predigested material in certain classes, than what your approach is to the endeavor of learning how to find things out, have ideas, and engage in rigorous, independent thinking, then it should be clear that in our recruitment of teachers we need not limit ourselves to those who have succeeded academically in any conventional sense. There are people in the ghettos right now, some of them parents of schoolage children, who are well qualified by their attitudes toward people and learning to be trained as teachers, even though they themselves may not have studied past the eighth grade.

Such reforms in teacher training, teacher power, and broader-based recruitment practices would have the effect of joining the school more organically to its neighborhood community, of opening up some of the existing social barriers, and of giving poor children the chance to see that this kind of honor and success could be theirs.

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James Herndon taught seventh, eighth and ninth grade English and Social Studies at a junior high school in California where almost all the pupils were Negro. His book describes the one year he spent there, at the end of which the principal fired him, having evaluated him as "unfit for the position of junior high school teacher in any school, anywhere, now or in the future...." The chief area in which Herndon was seen to be unfit was in his attitude to order and control. He did not share the administration's and the other teachers' belief in them. His descriptions of the children and his comments about education show his great insight and sensitivity as a teacher, and his portrayal of the way the school is run is horrifying.

Kohl, Herbert. 36 Children. New York: New American Library, Inc., 1967.

The 36 children are the sixth graders Kohl taught in his first year at an East Harlem public school. He taught there one more year, and then left, feeling uncertain whether he had done the right thing in allowing the children to think for themselves and have one good year in school, when he saw how their spirits were broken as they continued later without him. Whether or not his decision to leave for this reason was correct, he clearly was an excellent teacher, as the samples of the children's work and quotations from their class discussions show. Although Kohl's beliefs and practices were very different from those of the school, he was allowed to teach his own way, without much interference from the administration.

Kozol, Jonathan. Death at an Early Age: the Destruction of the Hearts and Minds of Negro Children in the Boston Public Schools. New York: Bantam Books, 1968.

Jonathan Kozol taught fourth grade at a Boston public school. He describes both the overt and the hidden racism of his fellow teachers, and portrays the Board and all the supervisory hierarchy as bigoted, rigid and uncomprehending of the needs of the children and of their own responsibilities. He tried to teach the

children in such a way as to show them he cared about them and respected them, but every time he thought he was succeeding, the administration would tell him that "these children" could not handle difficult material. Prominent among the character traits Kozol was supposed to develop in the children were "obedience to duly constituted authority" and "gratitude." He was fired not so much for his failure in these areas, as for reading Langston Hughes' poem "Ballad of the Landlord" with the class.

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